



ARTISTS TO WATCH

Postcards From the Edge

Barthélémy Toguo's provocative artworks give a voice to people who live on the periphery

BY LAURIE HURWITZ

YOU'RE ON A HIGH-SPEED TRAIN FROM Cologne to Paris when a black man wearing a garbage collector's uniform sits down nearby. Around him, other passengers hastily change their seats. A railway inspector tells him he is making people uncomfortable and orders him to leave the train, although he has a ticket. He refuses, despite the inspector's threats, and finishes the journey in an almost empty coach. The man is Barthélémy Toguo, and the unsettling incident is a performance, one in a series titled "Transit" he staged in the late '90s in airports, train stations, and other places where people are on the move.

Toguo himself is constantly in transit, so it isn't surprising that travel, migration, displacement, and exile are themes that pervade his work. He says that the idea of exile is inherent in the human condition regardless of race and culture. He is inspired by "human beings and how they move about, their different encounters, discoveries, sensations, disappointments."

When he arrives at his destination, Toguo often collaborates with other people to create an installation. He has taken his ongoing project *Head Above Water* to the alienated immigrant suburbs of Paris, as well as to Hiroshima, Johannesburg, Kosovo, Lagos, and Havana. In each place, he sets up what he calls a referendum, asking people to send him postcards with their messages about the world, which he then displays alongside his paintings. For *Philagrafika 2010* in Philadelphia, which runs through April 11, he organized *Heart Beat*, a reaction to media glut and media manipulation. Using inner-city students as his assistants, he censored pages from newspapers with black markers, leaving only the images visible, and used the scribbled-on newsprint as a wallpaper backdrop for his drawings.

Born in Cameroon, Toguo, 42, attended art school in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, before going to Europe in 1993. He began exhibiting and performing while finishing his studies in Grenoble and Düsseldorf. When he isn't traveling, he lives and works in Paris, New York, and Bandjoun, Cameroon.

To call Toguo versatile is an understatement. He moves effortlessly from painting, drawing, or printmaking to sculpture, photography, performance, or installation—or he combines them all. His first solo exhibition in New York was at Robert Miller Gallery last fall, and a new installation, *Liberty Leading the People*, will open at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon in May. His works will be featured in numerous upcoming group shows in Europe and Africa, as well as in the Venice Architecture Biennale this fall and the Biennale of Sydney this summer. He painted the image used on the official poster for this year's FIFA, the soccer World Cup, which will take place in South Africa in June.

Toguo somehow manages to spend time each month in his native Cameroon, where his most ambitious project yet—and the one closest to his heart—just opened. It is Bandjoun Station, which he describes as "primarily a creative workshop where I wish to bring together fellow artists and thinkers" from all over the world and to train African artists. At the same time, Bandjoun Station will encourage and help the local farmers to become self-sufficient food producers. Bandjoun Station will be a place where international guests and local people will encounter and discover one another. ■

Laurie Hurwitz is the Paris correspondent for ARTnews.



OPPOSITE The artist strikes a pose in his photograph *Afrika Oil*, 2005–8.

ABOVE Bandjoun Station.

ABOVE RIGHT *The Farmer*, 2003, watercolor.

RIGHT *Purification XXII*, 2009, watercolor.

